This is
Magritte
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The Liberator

René Magritte, 1947

Oil on canvas, 99.1 × 78.7 cm (39⅛ × 31 in)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,
Gift of William Copley (52.31)

René Magritte's influence can be considered, literally, stellar – asteroid number 7933 was named 'Magritte' after its discovery in 1989. The pipe, the gentleman with bowler hat, the dove, the strangely lit daylight sky contrasting with darkness on earth, the fluffy clouds, the apple: all these images have permeated our collective unconscious. Extensively used in advertising, they recur insistently in business logos and marketing signage. René Magritte's images, arguably more than those of any other artist, have become instantly recognizable in our popular culture.

What is it about Magritte that links the realms of pop culture and art? One key to this conundrum is the mystery his works evoke. For Magritte, a sense of mystery was central to existence itself. Shortly before his death he said: 'There exists a sense of mystery, the mystery of foreign countries, the depth of the sea – the mystery of the unfamiliar. Then there is also the mystery of the familiar . . .'

Magritte's work makes the familiar mysterious, twisting and turning it until it becomes something else entirely. He continually transformed his imagery, producing seemingly endless visions and revisions of both the artist and the art. In a self-portrait of 1947 entitled *The Liberator*, Magritte set himself up as a high priest of that mystery. And, appropriately enough, the image was based on a photograph that captured the artist staging the painting to be painted.

Beginnings

Mystery enshrouds not only Magritte's work, but also much of his biography. His reminiscences on his life often slip into the realm of strange stories, blurring the relationship between the real and the imagined, generating uncertainties of what is true and what is not. The person of Magritte has become a character – a fluid self that continually short-circuits any definitive understanding of who the man actually was.

What is certain is that René-François-Ghislain Magritte was born on 21 November 1898 at 10 rue de la Station in Lessines, a small town in the southern province of Hainaut, part of the French-speaking Walloon region of Belgium. Magritte's father, Léopold, and his mother, Régina Bertinchamps, came from long-established local families. They had only married on 2 March 1898, so René must have been a 'honeymoon baby'. Léopold's occupation on the marriage certificate was given as 'commercial traveller', while Régina was listed as a milliner. During the course of his childhood, Magritte's father changed employment several times, working with practical, unglamorous commodities such as edible oil and stock cubes, and the family relocated frequently. His two younger brothers were born at a new address in the small town of Gilly, Raymond in 1900 and Paul in 1902. While Raymond went on to become a successful businessman with few ties to the

family, Paul developed a close and lifelong relationship with his eldest brother. Nicknamed, as a young man, 'the Marquis' for his sartorial flair, Paul became a musician and collaborated on projects with René and his artist friends. He even joined Magritte in Paris from 1927 to 1930, and, when they returned to Belgium, the two brothers established the advertising firm Studio Dongo.

In 1904 the young family had moved to the town of Châtelet, on the River Sambre, where they settled for almost a decade. In 1910, the 12-year-old Magritte started painting classes, and, in 1911, the family moved to a larger house at 95 rue des Gravelles. The house was built to his father's specifications, its facade being decorated in the fashionable art nouveau style.

From the outside, the Magrittes must have seemed to be a normal, happy, prosperous middle-class family, enjoying the affluence and social mobility of the pre-war years in Belgium. But, a year after moving into their new home, things were to change dramatically.

Paul, Raymond and René Magritte, c.1905
Musée Magritte, Brussels

Magritte's mother had a history of depression and suicide attempts. Every night her husband locked her in the bedroom, but, in the early hours of 24 February 1912, she escaped. She jumped off a bridge near the family home and her body was only found 19 days later.

Magritte rarely talked of his mother's death, but the incident seems to haunt his paintings. She is there in the veiled and absent faces, and in the floating nude female figures, turned away from the viewer.

'Yesterday morning the corpse of the missing woman was recovered from the River Sambre, behind the Agglomérées slag heap.'

Journal de Charleroi, 13 March 1912

'The disappearance is reported of Régina Bertinchamps, Mme Magritte, of 95 rue des Gravelles, Châtelet, who has not been seen since about 4.30 AM on Sunday. Age, 40; height, 1 m 62; fairly stout build; black hair and eyebrows; clothes: red and white striped dressing-gown, white cotton nightdress with lace at the neck, black woollen stockings; gold wedding ring with the inscription 2-9-98 inside.'

Journal de Charleroi, 24 February 1912

Set in stone

One of Magritte's most prominent boyhood memories was of a series of encounters in the old cemetery of Soignies, where he had been sent by his father a few months after his mother's death, to stay with his grandmother and aunts. In a lecture he gave in 1938 entitled '*La ligne de vie*' ('Lifeline') he recalled:

> I liked to play with a little girl in the old, abandoned cemetery of a small provincial town. We roamed the underground vaults, whose heavy iron doors we were able to lift, and so we climbed again to the light, where an artist from the capital painted in an avenue of the cemetery, which was very picturesque with its broken stone columns over which dead leaves were scattered. The art of painting appeared to me then indefinitely magical and the painter gifted with higher powers.

Magritte's graveyard trysts seem to have inaugurated a lifelong interest in stones and petrification. This is evident in his many paintings featuring gravestones and coffins, and his work in grisaille, a style of painting using grey monochrome to imitate sculpture. Magritte's use of grisaille came to prominence much later in his life, in the late 1940s and 1950s. With traditional grisaille, the idea was to imitate the effect of a scene carved in relief in stone. But Magritte used grisaille, instead, to show ordinary, familiar objects and people as if they had turned to stone. In these paintings he was testing the boundaries between painting and sculpture, but the implication could also be that these objects had turned to stone because they were memories.

The Magritte children were raised by governesses, most of whom they scared off, until Jeanne Verdeyen arrived with her son. She became the family's housekeeper and, later, Léopold's common-law wife. In 1913 the whole household moved to neighbouring Charleroi, so that Magritte could attend senior school. Like many teenagers, and perhaps also because of his mother's death, his marks were poor, though he did receive quite high marks for his drawing. Magritte stopped going to school after the German invasion, which began on 4 August 1914, and the family returned to their Châtelet house in November of that year. A year later, Magritte moved to a boarding house in Brussels. Very little is known about what he was doing there – he is recorded as '*dessinateur*' (draughtsman) in the Brussels population register. Magritte provided little information about this period: 'During the 1914–18 War', he said, 'I enrolled at the Academy in Brussels. I stayed there two years. I lived alone at the time in a very free and easy boarding-house and seldom attended classes.' Records show that his enrolment in the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts was actually in 1916.

'I had a point of reference
which held me elsewhere, namely
that magic within art which
I had encountered as a child.'
René Magritte

Attempting the Impossible
René Magritte, 1928
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81 cm (45 11/16 × 31 7/8 in)
Galerie Isy Brachot, Brussels

The butcher's daughter

At a fair in Charleroi in 1913, the almost 15-year-old Magritte saw a 12-year-old girl with dark, untameable hair curling around her face. Her name was Georgette-Marie-Florence Berger; she also lived in Charleroi, where her father was a butcher. Georgette later recalled: 'In the square in the upper part of the town, there was a covered-in roundabout: "Come for a ride," said a very young man. After that René and I met almost daily on the way to our respective schools. The 1914 war began . . . René went off to Brussels and I lost touch with him.' It wasn't until January 1920 that the two met again, a serendipitous encounter, according to Georgette who, with her elder sister, had moved to the capital in October 1919: 'As it happened, after lunch one spring day in 1920, I was walking in the botanical garden with my sister when we "bumped into" René. Cries of delight. . . .' Georgette became Magritte's model and inspiration, and, in 1922, his wife.

While Magritte painted some other models, too, it was Georgette who was the recurrent subject of his works; he often framed her face or various parts of her body, as if to preserve her in art. The couple were to remain childless after Georgette had a miscarriage and there were health worries in relation to future pregnancies.

Magritte depicted Georgette, his lifelong collaborator, in *Attempting the Impossible*, a restaging of Ovid's mythic narrative of Pygmalion, who fell in love with a sculpture he carved of a beautiful woman. In answer to Pygmalion's prayers, the goddess Aphrodite brings the statue to life. In Magritte's painting, both model and painter seem petrified, frozen on the edge of becoming human or becoming stone.

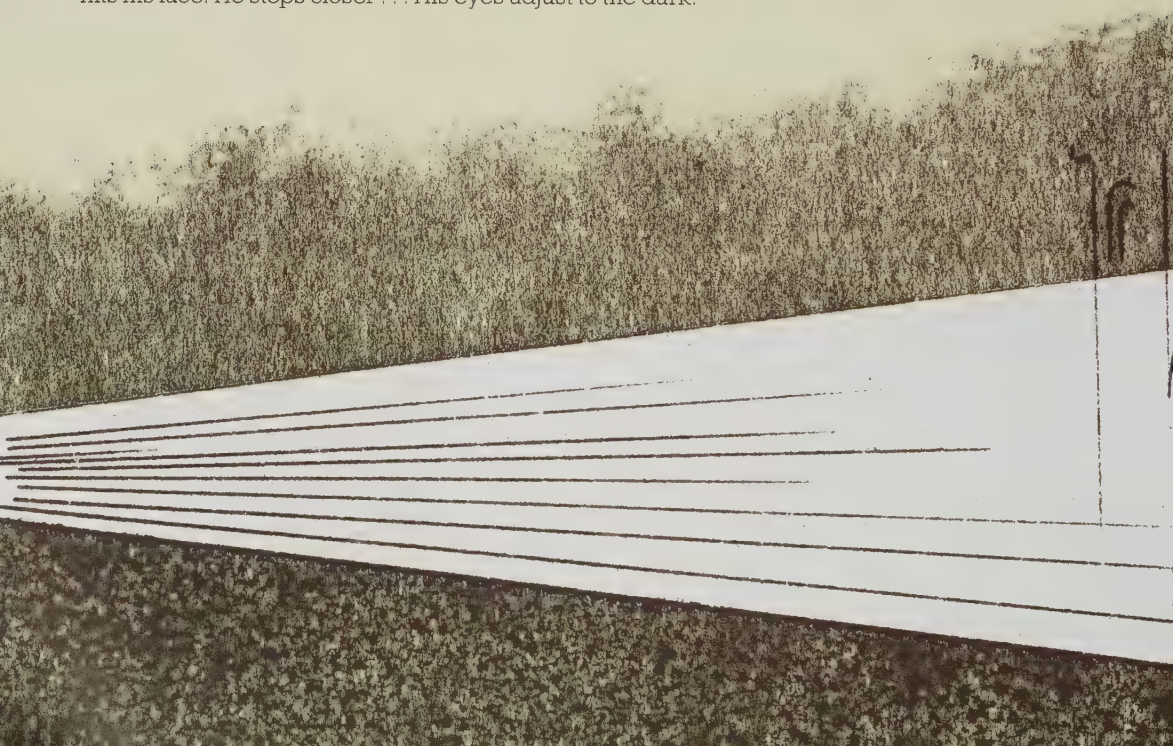
Magritte's painting continued a long line of painterly engagements with the Pygmalion myth by such nineteenth-century artists as Jean-Léon Gérôme and Edward Burne-Jones. But, while these other painters often emphasize the statue's coming to life, showing the surface of the sculpture transforming into human skin, Magritte instead depicts the statue as incomplete and fragmented. His painting addresses the impossibility of capturing the loved one and, also, the inevitable distinction between reality and its representation.

Cinema

The young Magritte was a fervent cinema-goer, and a recurrent motif in his paintings is the heavy red curtains that were raised, or drawn aside, from the screen as a film began.

He particularly loved Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* films, scenes from which recur often in his paintings. This series of silent French crime movies, the first of which was released in 1913 (when Magritte was 14), were immensely popular, and René Navarre, in the role of Fantômas, became an overnight sensation. The films were based on the novels of Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, which Magritte read feverishly, together with other pulp crime fiction including the series about American private detective Nick Carter. Magritte shared this Fantômas obsession with other avant-garde artists and writers around Europe, such as Juan Gris, Max Jacob and Robert Desnos. Magritte identified strongly with the master criminal Fantômas. Deceiving his victims through clever disguise, the Lord of Terror (as Fantômas was known) is pursued by detective Juve; but Fantômas always escapes at the very moment Juve thinks he has caught him. This is also the narrative of Magritte's own outline for a Fantômas plot, published more than a decade later as 'Notes on Fantômas' in Paul Nougé's Surrealist magazine *Distances* (March 1928):

> A bang. For a long time Juve has followed Fantômas's tracks. He sneaks over the broken tiles of a mysterious corridor. His fingers grope along the walls. Suddenly a warm blast of air hits his face. He steps closer . . . His eyes adjust to the dark.



A few metres in front of him, Juve sees a door made of loose boards. He strips off his coat, wraps it around his left arm and takes the safety cap off his revolver. As soon as he breaks through the door, it becomes clear his precautions were unnecessary: Fantômas lies there fast asleep. Juve quickly and securely ties up the sleeper. Fantômas carries on dreaming, perhaps about his disguises, as he usually does. In joyful exuberance Juve thoughtlessly utters words. These alarm the captive. He wakes up, and as he awakens, Fantômas is no longer Juve's prisoner. Juve has again failed. But there remains one means by which he can reach his goal: Juve must enter into a dream of Fantômas – he will try to be one of the characters there.

Visiting the cinema was one of the most popular pastimes in Brussels during World War I. Every film was evaluated by German censors and new films by the allied powers were rare, but productions submitted to the censors before mid-May 1915 were still accepted. Thus, the *Fantômas* films were frequently shown, and there were even rare showings of Charlie Chaplin films. Magritte's academy was forced to close down for several months in 1918 due to a lack of coal, so he probably spent significant amounts of time frequenting cinemas during this period.

The artistic crucible

When, in 1916, in the midst of the war and in occupied Brussels, Magritte started attending the Académie Royale des Beaux-Arts, his father and brothers also moved to Brussels, and the family once again shared a household. In 1917 they briefly moved back to Châtelet, but soon returned to Brussels, taking a large townhouse, with Magritte occupying the top floor. The townhouse was also the premises for Léopold's new stock-cube manufacturing business. One of Magritte's new academy friends, Charles Alexander, described a visit to the home that reveals much about the family dynamics:

> The whole family was at table and Magritte introduced me [to]: 'Popaul, my brother, who's an imbecile, because he doesn't give a damn for anyone, Raymond even more so; that's my dad, that's dad's mistress', he said, pointing to the housekeeper (I've no idea if it was true), 'and that's his bastard son.' And then his father leapt up in a rage and shouted at him: 'Imbecile, lout . . . insulting your family like that'.

The family's frequent moves point to the difficult circumstances of the German occupation, but also indicate a household with the means to move between large properties in different cities. Léopold's stock-cube business must have alleviated some of the effects of wartime food shortages, and his connections probably helped Magritte to get commercial work as a poster designer in those difficult times.

Due to the war and censorship, there was very limited access to great collections and works of art, and, perhaps because of this, Magritte turned for artistic inspiration to publishers' brochures, photographs and postcards, and to reproductions of all kinds of art. Immediately after the war, such materials gained an international flavour due to cultural exchange fostered by war-relief projects, but access to actual international art was much slower to develop.

Yet, even when access to original works became easier, Magritte's interest in reproductions did not fade. The status of the reproduction, and wider philosophical questions about the relationship between reproduction and original, were to preoccupy Magritte throughout his life. The evident detachment of the reproduction from the original, so different in size and dimensionality, in tone and hue, must have significantly influenced Magritte's perception of what art (and particularly modern, international art) was. It is also one explanation for the strange range of Magritte's palette – the black-and-white of newspapers and other monochrome reproductions, or even the garish, exaggerated colours of advertising.

FANTÔMAS
AÉRONAUTIQUE

Formative friendships

Magritte was exposed to his first truly modern art movement, Futurism, through reproduction – an exhibition catalogue given to him, probably, by a new friend, Pierre Bourgeois. By 1919, Magritte was sharing a studio with Pierre-Louis Flouquet and had become friends with the Bourgeois brothers, Victor and Pierre. All three would, together with Magritte, be at the heart of avant-garde artistic life in Brussels in the decade to come. Flouquet was a painter and Victor a budding architect. His brother, Pierre, was a poet and writer. The Bourgeois brothers included Magritte on the editorial board for their review of modern art and architecture, *Au Volant*, the first issue appearing in January 1919. In December of that year, Victor, together with the young Belgian writer Aimé Declercq, opened the Centre d'Art in Brussels, which exhibited poster designs by Magritte in its opening exhibition.

Another key figure was the young musician E.L.T. Mesens, whom Magritte met in January 1920. He later described Mesens: '[he] wore a beard and gave piano lessons to [my brother] Paul . . .. At that time Mesens took things very seriously, and father taught him the existence of humour by playing innocent jokes on him, which used to anger the young musician.' Together, Magritte and Mesens contacted the Italian Futurists, whose intention of doing

away with the arts of the past they found admirable. Magritte even painted briefly in the Futurist style, though none of these works survives. Shortly before his death, in 1967, he recalled: 'It was a pleasure to paint in that style [but] I didn't keep anything; nothing remains of my Futurist exercises.' Magritte and Mesens soon distanced themselves from the movement.

Parisian flair and artistic *joie de vivre* were becoming popular in Belgium. Paul-Gustave Van Hecke's bar in Brussels became a bustling meeting spot for artists, writers and cultural figures, including the Constructivist 7 Arts group with whom Magritte and Mesens became closely involved. The 7 Arts members were fervent urbanists and their review, *7 Arts*, was focused on the aesthetics of the machine and industrialization. The founders included the Bourgeois brothers, Flouquet and Karel Maes.

The career trajectories of Mesens and Magritte would prove intertwined, though not unproblematic. Mesens created opportunities for Magritte's work to be seen, while Magritte's work significantly forged Mesens's ultimate career as a successful art dealer and gallerist. It was under Mesens's direction at the Galerie L'Epoque that Magritte exhibited his early work; Mesens was also editor of the 1929 special issue of *Variétés*, one of the most significant collaborations between the Brussels and French Surrealists. He became Magritte's art dealer in 1931 and was key in introducing Magritte to British audiences.

The 7 Arts group in the Magritte kitchen, 1922

(clockwise from left: René Magritte, E.L.T. Mesens, Victor Servranckx, Pierre-Louis Flouquet, Pierre Bourgeois, Henriette Flouquet, Pierre Broodcoorens and Georgette Magritte).
Musée Magritte, Brussels

Magritte of many styles

Magritte's style developed through several different stages and transformations. By 1920, when he began taking trips to Paris, his work started to reveal a Cubist influence and his subsequent paintings, from the early 1920s, were influenced not only by Cubism, but also by Constructivism, Fauvism and Futurism. *Flowers before a Window*, of 1920, corresponds with Mesens's description of some of Magritte's works of the time as being 'timidly futuristic . . ., syntheses in the style of conventional Cubism'. The assemblage of blocks of strong colours points to the influence of 7 Arts group-member Victor Servranckx, who saw in his own geometric, abstract art a way of developing a universal art language which could be understood by everybody.

Servranckx and Magritte collaborated in 1922 on an unpublished text (dedicated to Mesens) called '*L'Art pur: defense de l'esthétique*' ('Pure Art: In Defence of Aesthetics'). Their key message, 'APPLIED ART KILLS PURE ART', was a defence of the aesthetic concerns they were expressing in their work of the time. Out of economic necessity, both men were also having to work as wallpaper designers, which lent weight to their complaint that artists were having to waste their time producing 'mediocre' art objects for mass consumption (in which they included architecture, textiles and furniture) in order to survive. Magritte's abstract works differ from those of Servranckx in incorporating decorative elements, as is clear from *Flowers before a Window*, where both the patterning and the brightness of the colours resemble the Orphic Cubism of Sonia Delaunay in Paris.

The use of colour also reminds us that Magritte's visual sources were either monochrome or approximate colour reproductions. He often had to guess at the actual colour scheme of the work he was imitating and this, actually, gave him the freedom to compose an imagined, and therefore unique, palette. It is probable, therefore, that the intense blue seen here, which became the signature colour for his later work, sprang from his imagination's relation to these reproductions. Magritte's later obsession with frames and compartmentalization is also evident in this early work, as he plays with dimensionality within different spaces in the painting.

Flowers before a Window
René Magritte, 1920
Oil on canvas, 81 × 71 cm (34⅛ × 27¹⁵⁄₁₆ in)
Private Collection

The wallpaper artist

Magritte started his full-time job as a designer at the wallpaper manufacturer Peters-Lacroix in Brussels in November 1921, on the strength of his training at the academy and his earlier poster designs. In letters of the time, he notes: 'There's a special technique to be acquired for this job – small things one wouldn't suspect, rules to get to know which are well-defined laws of harmony.' This technique involved the avoidance of showing movement, and the consideration of flatness – flowers and leaves should not be superimposed over each other, as this would have implied a depth inappropriate to wallpaper. As Magritte noted: 'It's absolutely right because in that case there are two planes, and since wallpaper is decorative the "two dimensions" must be respected.'

Magritte's observations on wallpaper design point to the importance in his future work of repeated images, icons, patterns, motifs and even titles, and of the tensions that emerged out of the differences within, and between, such repetitions. He played, in his paintings, with the flatness and two-dimensionality of decorative patterns, and the characteristic bareness of his colour patches produces strange contrasts.

Still, after a year's employment he found the factory 'as unbearable as the barracks' in which he had lived during a brief period of military service in 1921. He quit and 'sought a living doing idiotic jobs – posters and publicity designs'.

Couture Norine (advertisement design)
René Magritte, 1926
Gouache, watercolour and China ink
118 × 80 cm (46⅞ × 31½ in)
Private Collection

Norine

In the years following World War I, the most important haute couture house in Brussels was Maison Norine. The name derived from the first name of Honorine Deschryver, a modern, elegant woman also known as Nono. She founded Norine after the war with her husband Paul-Gustave Van Hecke, the Brussels bar-owner, journalist, author, couturier and art dealer who was leading the vogue for all things Parisian. Introduced to each other by Mesens (who was Van Hecke's protégé, as well as Nono's lover), during the 1920s they became Magritte's principal patrons.

Van Hecke was instrumental in bringing leading avant-garde work from Paris to Brussels. He edited the review *Sélection*, which he co-founded with the art writer André de Ridder and which was first published in August 1920, appearing ten times a year; Mesens ultimately became its editor. *Sélection* discussed Surrealist developments and featured Surrealist art and writing in its glossy pages. It was especially supportive of Flemish Expressionists, such as Gustave de Smet and Frits van den Berghe, but also promoted recent Cubist art from Paris. This last focus was expanded in Van Hecke's gallery, Sélection – Atelier d'Art Contemporain. Also established in 1920, the gallery introduced Belgium, and Magritte, to the art of Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, Marie Laurencin, Diego Rivera and many others in the world beyond the Belgian capital.

By 1927, Van Hecke had become a major driving force behind the introduction of Surrealism to Belgium, and it was he who founded the magazine *Variétés*. Anti-bourgeois and anti-Catholic, it shared the ideas of French Surrealism, from which it sprang. He also founded the Galerie L'Epoque and appointed Mesens to manage it.

Rather than importing styles from Paris, the fashion house Norine created its own designs, fusing contemporary art and fashion. From around 1924 onwards, Magritte designed fashion posters and advertisements for Norine, adopting a distinctively art deco style, and these often appeared in issues of *Sélection* and *Variétés*, strengthening the links between art and fashion. Magritte's promise as an artist and his expertise in design proved an ideal combination in promoting Norine's label. The roaring 1920s was the fashion house's most innovative decade, but Norine continued to be influential throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Magritte's poster designs for Norine show his awareness of fashion and garments and their powers to disguise a person, an element he frequently used in his later paintings.

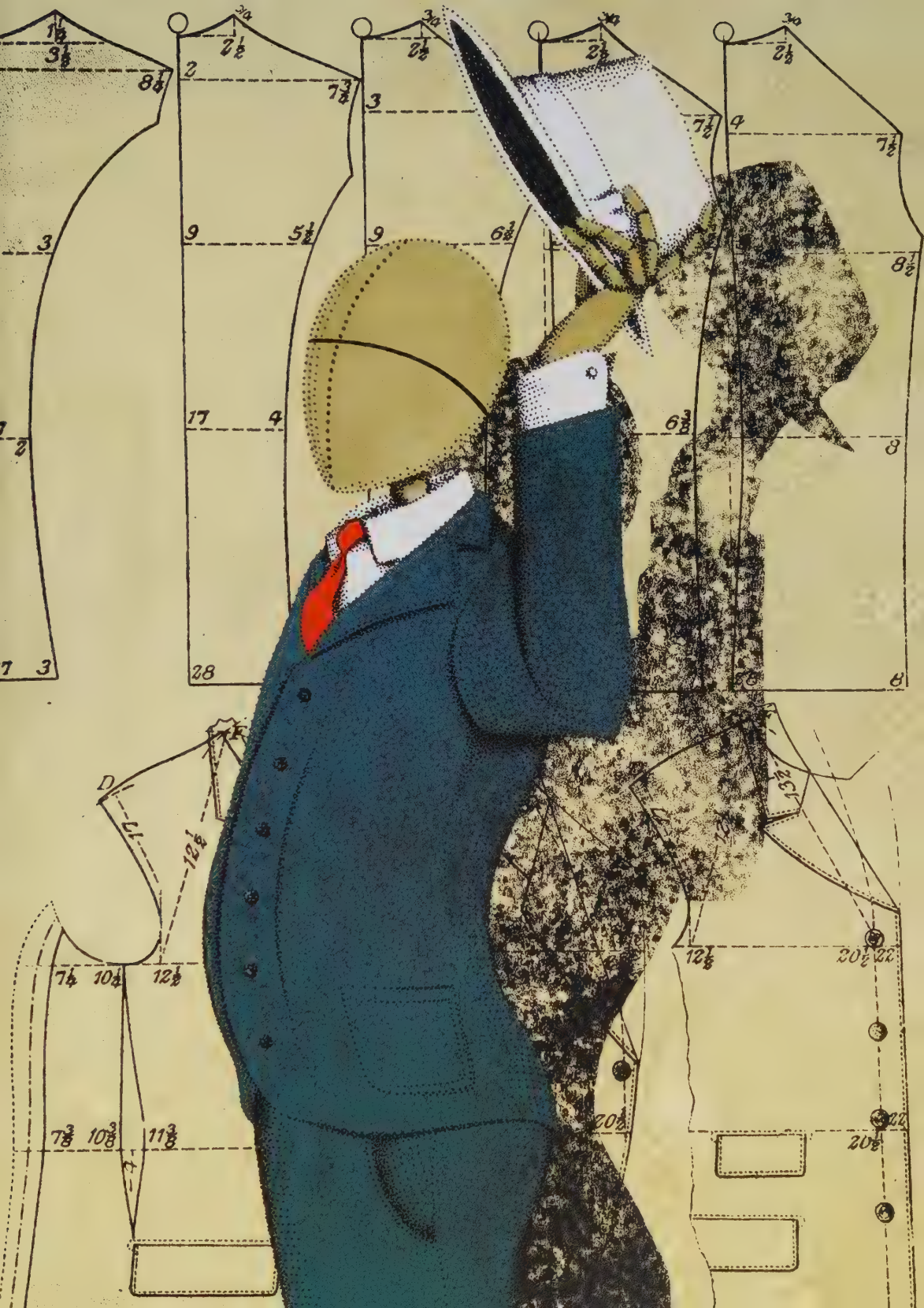
Sartorial transformations

The bowler hat is perhaps the most iconic image in Magritte's art and his interest in headwear and questions of dress and dress codes was already apparent as a young man. Recalling his appearance in the early 1920s, Mesens described a style-conscious young man, albeit without a bowler hat:

> He seemed to us extremely elegant. He had suits made to measure which were so nipped-in at the waist that they gave him the look of a pregnant girl. Every Sunday his father crimped his hair with curling-tongs. He also, at that time, wore button boots with pearl-grey cloth uppers and crowned this whole get-up with an enormous wide-brimmed Borsalino: a first-communion cake under a cheesedome!

As the decade wore on, however, Magritte increasingly modelled himself on Fantômas, adopting a plain suit style in imitation of that bourgeois man, topping this with a bowler hat – an item often worn by detectives in the films about Fantômas and Judex (another of Feuillade's fictional criminals). Another influence was, of course, the most famous bowler-hatted figure of the decade, Charlie Chaplin. Well known from the early 1920s, Charlot (as he was nicknamed in the French-speaking world) was a recurring subject in the Belgian review *Le Disque vert* – avidly read by Magritte and his circle. Chaplin's character, the Little Tramp, was certainly an inspiration for Magritte's bowler-hatted figures, endlessly gesturing with their walking sticks.

And the bowler hat is undoubtedly emblematic of the artist, cementing as it did a connection between his bowler-hatted person and the various representations of bowler hats in his paintings. Bowler-hatted figures, wearing suits (and sometimes carrying walking sticks), appear frequently, sometimes alone, often as roaming men eternally misplaced on beaches and deserted streets. Sometimes, these figures seem to embody night and day, to fall like rain from the sky or peer menacingly into windows.



The Window
Rene Magritte, 1925
Oil on canvas, 65 × 50 cm (25⅝ × 19⅝ in)
Private Collection

Surrealist encounter

Around 1922, Magritte first saw a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, *The Song of Love*, in a black-and-white photograph, and, as he said in his autobiography, he 'could not keep back his tears any longer'. This moment was an epiphany – he had finally encountered an artwork that spoke directly to him. De Chirico's enigmatic landscapes, peopled by isolated shapes, strangely detached, dreamlike figures, haunting sculptures and out-of-scale objects, were seen by Magritte and other artists who soon coalesced under the rubric of Surrealism. André Breton, the 'father' of Surrealism, had himself encountered de Chirico's work in poet and critic Guillaume Apollinaire's apartment in Paris some years earlier.

In 1925, the de Chirico influence suddenly manifested itself in Magritte's first clearly 'Surrealist' painting, *The Window*. This work echoes de Chirico's characteristic distortion of angles and size, and his juxtapositions of subject matter, as well as his use of theatrical stage-like settings – prominent elements in Magritte's subsequent work.

Magritte and Mesens were also fascinated by Dada, the anti-art movement that started in Zurich in 1916 and spread throughout Europe after the war. It flourished particularly in Paris, and would eventually meld into Breton's Surrealist movement after 1924. Mesens was taken up by Erik Satie (Dada's own composer, who was strongly admired by both young men) and Tristan Tzara (Dada's founder), who introduced him to Francis Picabia (creator of the Dada review *391*), Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp. Dada, however, with its fascination with the absurd and the accidental, and its rejection of established definitions of art, was not well thought of by the Brussels set and both Mesens and Magritte suffered at home for their sympathies with it.

Giorgio de Chirico
The Song of Love, 1914
Oil on canvas, 73 × 59.1 cm
(28¾ × 23⅜ in)
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York, Nelson A. Rockefeller
Bequest (950.1979).

Surrealism took a much more serious approach to art than did Dada, and its interest in the absurd and accidental had more to do with theories of the unconscious, including those of Sigmund Freud. While Magritte and Mesens maintained a sympathy with the anarchic nature of Dada, most of their friends in the Brussels avant-garde moved decidedly to Surrealism. The battle lines were drawn – and the key manoeuvres took place in print:

'I loathe Dada! Magritte and Mesens were still dabbling in Dada, while my review *Correspondance* attracted the attention of Breton and the Paris Surrealists. I became the "leader" of Surrealism in Brussels, and Magritte would soon become a close friend of mine!'

Paul Nougé

'In 1924, I issued a Dada prospectus together with Mesens, Lecomte and Goemans, but the latter two deserted us to join Paul Nougé's review *Correspondance*. Our review was *Œsophage*.'

René Magritte

'In April 1926 I started editing a new review called *Marie* - Magritte and I became closer to Nougé. In July of the same year we got together with him, Goemans and Souris, and produced three texts - signed by all of us. They were included in the final number of *Marie* called *Adieu à Marie*. I suppose we were the central part of what would become Brussels Surrealism.'

E.L.T. Mesens

'*Correspondance* takes leave of Marcel Lecomte – they kicked me out in July 1925!'

Marcel Lecomte,
poet and critic

'Nougé pointed the way, and the way was towards Paris and Surrealism. I moved there prior to Magritte's arrival, and set up a gallery and became an important link between Brussels and Parisian artists. In spring 1928 I founded with Nougé another review called *Distances* – this time, though, there were no animosities. Magritte was one of our contributors.'

Camille Goemans, art dealer

'We [Souris and fellow musician Paul Hooreman] joined the *Correspondance* group in the summer of 1925.'

André Souris, composer

The artist and music

A major difference between French, or Bretonian, Surrealism and Brussels Surrealism was their respective attitudes to music. Breton was amused by, but had little interest in, music, rejecting it as a viable art form because he thought it too snobbish. However, Mesens, Magritte's brother Paul, Souris and Hooreman were all musicians, and music played an important and diverse role in Magritte's painting throughout his life. Magritte later assigned the problems he had with Breton to the latter's rejection of music – for Magritte, a person who disliked music could not be trusted. Magritte's favourite composers included Satie, Bach, Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky and Wagner, and he particularly liked Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* and Mozart's *Requiem*. He designed sheet-music covers in the mid-1920s, almost certainly acquiring the work through his many friends in the music world.

In 1925, Magritte and Georgette (under the pseudonym René Georges) wrote the lyrics for 'Norine Blues'. Accompanied by music composed by his brother Paul (who became a successful composer, often using the pseudonym Bill Buddie for his dance and jazz compositions), the lines offer an entrancing verbal collage of fragmented advertising slogans and poetic texts, combining into entrancing sound patterns (a now familiar mixing of the commercial and the artistic):

> This is 'diabolical' and 'capricious', 'Marquita' 'Mitsou' shimmering dresses hazy 'clouds' 'morning dew', goodly Mousmée 'flown away', 'Sweet Night' Cocktail, 'Let us be discreet' 'Here are flowers', 'The beautiful Roses', 'Great Lama', 'The Winner' falls for 'Geisha', to sooth his 'Neurosis' 'Indian Dream', 'The whim of the wind' The 'Golden Blues' 'sparkles', 'At the Wheel' I saw 'The Prince Igor' 'abduct me' 'Flame' 'Impetuous' 'As He' in a beautiful 'Dream' of Gold O 'Radjah' I am very 'Elegant!' beautiful dresses beautiful Names! 'Vibrating wonder' 'Mad Passion' 'In full bloom!'

It was subtitled '*Les jolies robes aux jolis noms*' ('Pretty dresses with pretty names'). The piece was performed at the Kursaal concert hall in Ostende by Evelyne Brélia (who loved Magritte's work and to whom he had sold his first canvas in 1923) at the '*Gala des choses en vogue*' (Gala of Things in Fashion). This was a colourful show of hats, furs, jewellery, wigs, headdresses, dolls, scents, songs, dances and many other things *en vogue*, and, at the time, blues music was just as fashionable as the most voguish of these.

et capricieuse
pour calmer sa névrose
nuages
Le gagnant s'éprenait de Geisha
Voici des fleurs
un beau rêve d'or
folle passion toute fleurie !

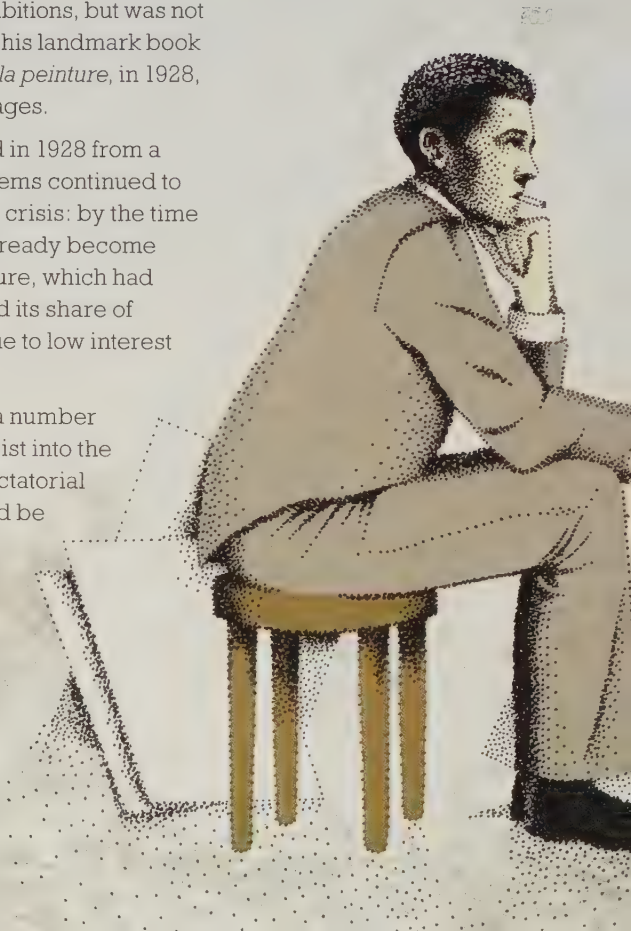
Paris

In September 1927 Georgette and Magritte (joined later by his brother Paul) moved to Paris, following Camille Goemans, who had moved there in April to set up a gallery. Goemans introduced Magritte to the Parisian Surrealists including Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Joan Miró and Hans Arp (for whom Georgette did the stitching on a number of his string-relief artworks). Artistically, the almost three-year stay in Paris proved highly productive and innovative – in 1928 alone Magritte completed over a hundred paintings. But, in other terms, it was a difficult period. They could only afford accommodation in the distant and deeply unfashionable suburb of Perreux-sur-Marne, though they stayed occasionally with Goemans in the city centre and Magritte met Goemans and Miró every Thursday for lunch.

Attempting, however, to be fully accepted into André Breton's Surrealist circle proved frustrating. Unlike fellow Belgians Goemans and Nougé, Magritte was not invited to sign the seminal Surrealist tract 'Permettez!' ('Allow us!') of 23 October 1927. Goemans, who was also Magritte's Paris art dealer, tried to get his paintings into Surrealist galleries and exhibitions, but was not often successful. And, when Breton published his landmark book on Surrealism and painting, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, in 1928, Magritte was conspicuously absent from its pages.

In addition, Magritte's 57-year-old father died in 1928 from a stroke, and from the beginning of 1929 problems continued to amass in the shadow of the growing financial crisis: by the time of the Wall Street crash in October, art had already become difficult to sell. In Brussels, Galerie Le Centaure, which had taken over Van Hecke's Galerie L'Epoque and its share of Magritte's contract, cancelled the contract due to low interest from buyers.

In 1929, however, Breton himself purchased a number of Magritte's pictures, finally ushering the artist into the Surrealist club. But Breton's mercurial and dictatorial personality meant that his membership would be short-lived.



Visitez
Montmartre

The Reckless Sleeper
René Magritte, 1928
Oil on canvas, 116 × 81 cm (46⅛ × 31⅞ in)
Tate

The interpretation of dreams

Many of Magritte's best-known works and ideas emerged during his Paris period: his famous word-paintings and his intriguing objects floating in space, his concerns with framing and seeing, representation and reality. The deeply intense, dynamic and cosmopolitan artistic avant-garde he found in Paris and his drive to establish himself in it combined to develop a range of new artistic directions and thoughts. In particular, he critically engaged with Breton's emphasis on Freud's dream analysis and symbols. In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924 Breton, playing with the conventions of dictionary and encyclopaedia entries, had defined Surrealism as:

> SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.
>
> ENCYCL. *Philos.* Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.

While Magritte's paintings often seem to play on dream imagery or to represent dream-like scenarios, he always rejected psychoanalysis. He claimed that he hated symbols and maintained, 'The thought expressed in my work is absolute . . . It can't be interpreted. In my painting, a bird is a bird. And a bottle is a bottle, not a symbol of a womb.'

In Magritte's *The Reckless Sleeper*, the dreamer is boxed up, as if buried, isolated from the obvious Freudian dream imagery below, which appears set in stone. The painting seems to be a reflection on Magritte himself and on his position in relation to the seemingly impenetrable Parisian Surrealist group and their thoughts. But the painting also shows his rejection of psychoanalysis, whether in relation to the production of the artwork through automatic processes devoid of conscious decisions, or in the work's interpretation. More than music, this separates Magritte and Brussels Surrealism from the Paris group. In the review *Correspondance*, Nougé and Goemans both objected to the notion of the dream as an unconscious resource that could be unproblematically accessed, since, as soon as an attempt is made to communicate it, either language or image is used – both of which communicate the dream in already pre-set, and therefore consciously organized, ways.

Mining the encyclopaedia

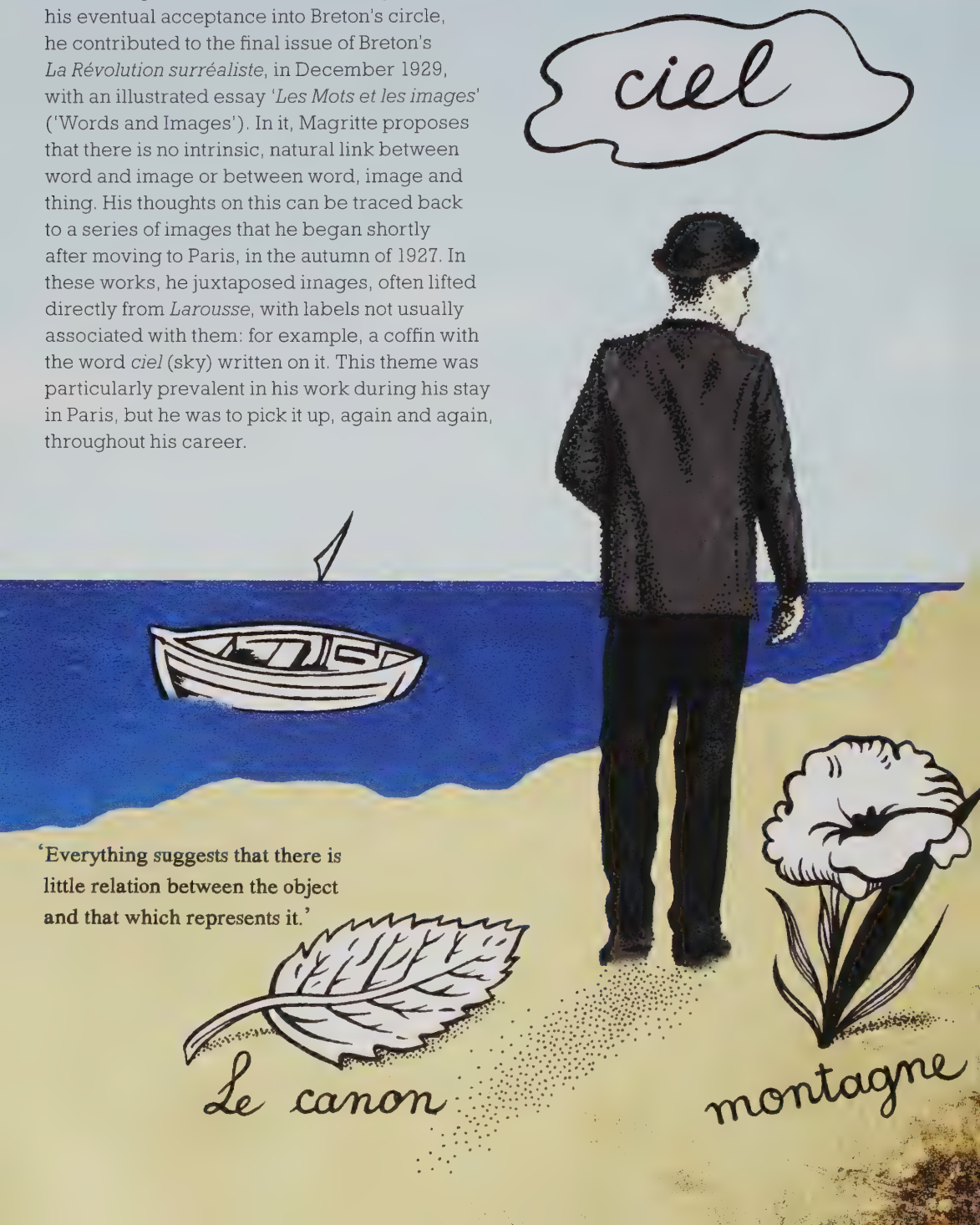
For Magritte and the Surrealists, the encyclopaedia was a treasure trove and an instrument of revolution. At its inception in the eighteenth century, as Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, it was a subversive tool of the Enlightenment bringing information to the masses; it quickly became that century's bestseller, contributed significantly to public education and became a standard set of volumes, found in a majority of households of all social classes. Diderot's work inspired the creation of other encyclopaedias and, by the early twentieth century, the encyclopaedia of choice in the French-speaking world was *Larousse*. Not only did the encyclopaedia provide information about everything from A to Z, but the information recorded was based on the principle that knowledge should derive from the senses and reason, and not from a faith system. The strange juxtaposition of topics resulting from the alphabetical (rather than thematic) organization of the entries provided an additional attraction for the Surrealists.

The encyclopaedia format clearly influenced Breton's definition of 'Surrealism' in the first manifesto; for Magritte and other artists, such as Max Ernst, it was a major repository of images. True to his fascination with reproductions, Magritte was drawn to the concise, simple and informative illustrations that filled *Larousse*. One subject that Magritte painted again and again from the mid-1920s is the 'Lost Jockey' – the image of a lone racing horse and its rider, far from the race track and, usually, in a bleak, winter landscape. In this 1948 version, the pair gallop through leaf-shaped trees clearly lifted directly from the pages of *Larousse* (specifically the entry for '*taille*', the art of pruning) to make a bleak, wintry, ethereal landscape.

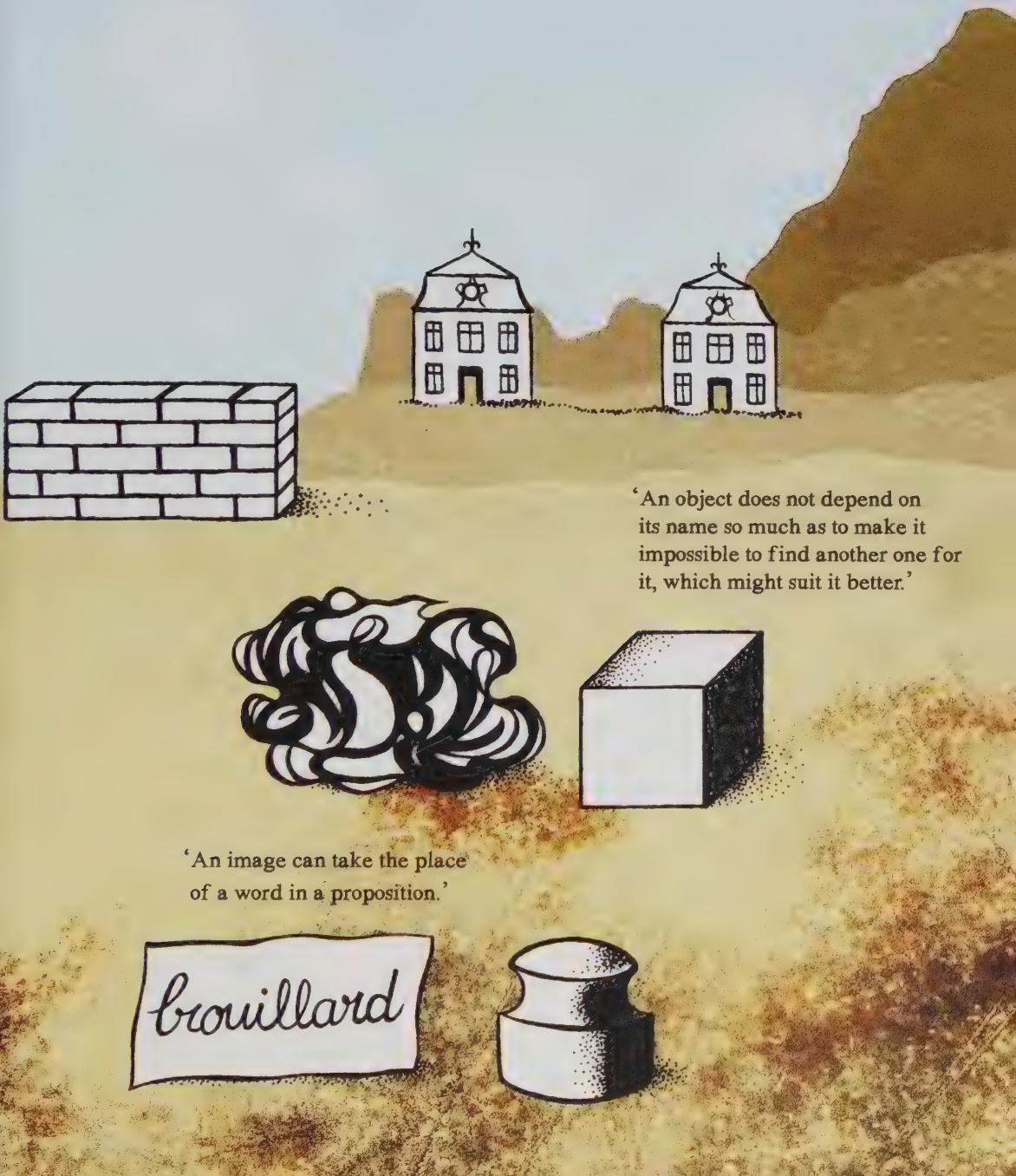
Pruning, detail of an illustration from *Twentieth-century Larousse*, 1928–33.

The Lost Jockey
René Magritte, 1948
Gouache on paper
50.5 × 64.8 cm (19⅞ × 25½ in)
Private Collection

Among Magritte's most significant philosophical propositions and painterly innovations during his Paris period were his explorations of the relationships between word and image. After his eventual acceptance into Breton's circle, he contributed to the final issue of Breton's *La Révolution surréaliste*, in December 1929, with an illustrated essay '*Les Mots et les images*' ('Words and Images'). In it, Magritte proposes that there is no intrinsic, natural link between word and image or between word, image and thing. His thoughts on this can be traced back to a series of images that he began shortly after moving to Paris, in the autumn of 1927. In these works, he juxtaposed images, often lifted directly from *Larousse*, with labels not usually associated with them: for example, a coffin with the word *ciel* (sky) written on it. This theme was particularly prevalent in his work during his stay in Paris, but he was to pick it up, again and again, throughout his career.



'Everything suggests that there is little relation between the object and that which represents it.'


'An object does not depend on its name so much as to make it impossible to find another one for it, which might suit it better.'
'An image can take the place of a word in a proposition.'
brouillard

Threatening Weather
René Magritte, 1929

Oil on canvas
54 × 73 cm (21¼ × 28¾ in)
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Edinburgh

Dalí

Magritte met Salvador Dalí in the spring of 1929. Dalí was in Paris at the time to film, together with his old friend the filmmaker Luis Buñuel, the iconic Surrealist masterpiece *Un chien Andalou*. Contrary to Magritte's struggle, Dalí had been easily accepted into the Parisian group. Miró arranged their initial meeting, telling Dalí that he would be meeting a girl called 'Marguerite'. According to Dalí:

> I was sure he was referring to the Belgian painter René Magritte whom I considered one of the most 'mysteriously equivocal' painters of the moment. The idea that this painter should be a woman and not a man as I had always supposed, bowled me over completely, and I decided beforehand that even if she was not very, very beautiful, I would surely fall in love with her.

Several meetings between Magritte and Dalí followed, in Camille Goemans's apartment.

In August 1929, Dalí invited the Magrittes to holiday in Cadaqués, a fishing village on the Catalonian coast where his family had a house. Georgette later told Magritte's biographer, David Sylvester, that there were four of them travelling together: René and Georgette, Goemans and his companion Yvonne Bernard, as well as the Magrittes' dogs Loulou and Doumi. Georgette remembered Dalí as 'very nice, not at all zany'. They were joined by Buñuel and by the poet (and co-founder of French Surrealism) Paul Eluard and his wife Gala. In Georgette's recollection, what followed was a month boating or walking in the countryside, but 'as for Gala, she paid attention mostly to the gentlemen and a great deal less to the women'.

By the end of the year Gala had left Eluard for Dalí. Magritte painted *Threatening Weather* during this stay in Cadaqués. Eluard acquired it later, perhaps as a poignant memento of his final holiday with Gala. The painting's landscape is that of Cadaqués, but it also shows Magritte and Dalí's mutual influences, particularly in the bright, blue palette.

Magritte later grew ambivalent towards Dalí, regarding him as superficial and objecting to his political connections, which included mixing with the Pope and tacitly supporting Franco's dictatorship in Spain. There was also some professional animosity: in a 1959 letter Magritte described Dalí's *The Burning Giraffe* of 1937 as 'a stupid caricature, an unintelligent – because easy and useless – outdoing of the image, which I painted [*The Ladder of Fire* of 1934], in which I showed a burning piece of paper and a burning key.'

The Third Dimension
René Magritte, 1942
Oil on canvas, 74 × 55 cm (29⅛ × 21⅝ in)
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen,
Sammlung Moderne Kunst,
Pinakothek der Moderne München

Cabinets of curiosities

As with the encyclopaedia and its attempt to classify and catalogue all things, Magritte was also fascinated by the *wunderkammer* (chamber of marvels) so popular among the European elite from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Often, these 'chambers' were actually artfully crafted cabinets with many drawers or compartments in which the collector stored and displayed an assortment of precious objects. The collections in these cabinets lacked the systematic approach of the encyclopaedia, but instead were organized by a desire to include every discipline, from art to science.

The *wunderkammer* influenced many of the Surrealists, including Marcel Duchamp, and were also the inspiration for an American artist, the eccentric Joseph Cornell and his assemblages in boxes. Magritte's own fascination with the *wunderkammer*'s boxed structures was evident from 1927 when he began creating his 'word and image' paintings, which often showed objects separated into different compartments. These compartmentalized compositions continued to evolve, sometimes with, and sometimes without, words. *The Third Dimension* of 1942 shows a later evolution of this theme, with its collection of exotic birds. This was a common subject of the *wunderkammer*, as evidenced by Alexandre-Isidore Leroy de Barde's early nineteenth-century *Exotic Birds Organized in Different Boxes*. But Magritte's birds are, once again, exactly copied from a page in *Larousse* and, instead of being placed in different boxes, they cluster on a gigantic leaf as if they were a grouping of small insects.

Alexandre-Isidore
Leroy de Barde
Exotic Birds Organized in Different Boxes, c.1810
Watercolour and China ink on paper,
126 × 90 cm (49⅝ × 35⅜ in)
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Surrealist excommunications

After their return from Cadaqués, the Magrittes seemed finally to have been brought into the Parisian Surrealist communion. The year closed with the publication, in the twelfth and final issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* on 15 December 1929, of Magritte's article '*Les Mots et les images*' ('Words and Images') and a photomontage of photo-booth images showing the Surrealists. Not only was Magritte included, but the photographs were arranged around one of his paintings, *The Hidden Woman*, made that year. All the Surrealists' eyes are closed, as if each has uttered the words on the painting, '*je ne vois pas la* [*femme*] *cachée dans la forêt*' ('I do not see the [woman] hidden in the forest').

Montage of 16 identity photos framing Magritte's *The Hidden Woman*. Published in *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 12, 15 December 1929.

Clockwise from top left: Maxime Alexandre, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Luis Buñuel, Jean Caupenne, Paul Eluard, Marcel Fournier, René Magritte, Albert Valentin, André Thirion, Yves Tanguy, Georges Sadoul, Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí.

It is, therefore, rather ironic that this publication emerged a day after a major and, as it transpired, long-term falling out with his new-found brothers. The day before, the whole group had gathered at Breton's apartment. Breton noticed the cross Georgette wore around her neck (as a memorial to her grandmother), and demanded that she remove '*cet objet*' ('that object'). Humiliated and insulted, Georgette left and Magritte went with her. A little more than six months later, on 10 July 1930, the Magrittes moved back to Brussels.

That same month Magritte was pointedly omitted from the declaration of solidarity that Breton included in the first issue of the new review, *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution* (*SASDLR*). And, for the following three years, he was entirely excluded from Surrealist activity in France, which minimized Magritte's exhibition and sales opportunities and led to financial difficulties. Finally, after Breton and Eluard had sent him inscribed books as a gesture of reconciliation, Magritte was invited to contribute to the two final issues of *SASDLR*, in May 1933, marking an end to the estrangement. Almost 30 years later, in 1958, Magritte insisted: 'My relationships with the Surrealists were not altered by our return to Belgium: nothing changed, for better or worse.'

135 rue Esseghem, Brussels

Not long before their move back to Brussels, Magritte was struck by another blow. Camille Goemans's Parisian gallery folded in April 1930, just before it was due to host Magritte's long-anticipated one-man Paris show. Magritte no longer had a Paris dealer – indeed Goemans (following a tumultuous split from Yvonne) was himself homeless. He stayed a while with the Magrittes after the gallery closed, and then moved back to Brussels in May. During these last months in the French capital, the Magrittes relied on food parcels from Georgette's father, and René had to turn, once again, to commercial work. Mesens tried to help Magritte by purchasing any works he had available. But, both the upheavals and the time spent on commercial work affected how much of his own painting he could produce. Magritte received an offer of a job in Paris but declined it in order to accommodate Georgette's desire to move back home.

In July they returned to Brussels. With his brother Paul, whose career as a composer had begun to wane, Magritte decided to establish a commercial art company, Studio Dongo. He and Georgette rented a ground-floor apartment in the northwestern suburb of Jette, at 135 rue Esseghem. Studio Dongo produced a range of posters, advertising and display material for trade fairs and shop windows. Their brother, Raymond, supported this new venture, utilizing his business contacts to help secure commissions for his brothers. Between 1933 and 1938, Magritte also worked under the name EMAIR (the phonetic spelling of Magritte's reversed initials: M.R.), designing popular song covers published by Les Editions Modernes.

Georgette and René lived at rue Esseghem until 1954. The poet Louis Scutenaire described their domestic arrangements:

> . . . in the dining-room, Magritte paints, has his meals, receives visitors and lives his everyday life. He was hampered by the smallness of the room, being caught between the table, the door and the stove. He bumped against the table, he was roasted by the stove, and the door, swinging open to admit someone, might strike his arm and deflect his brush.

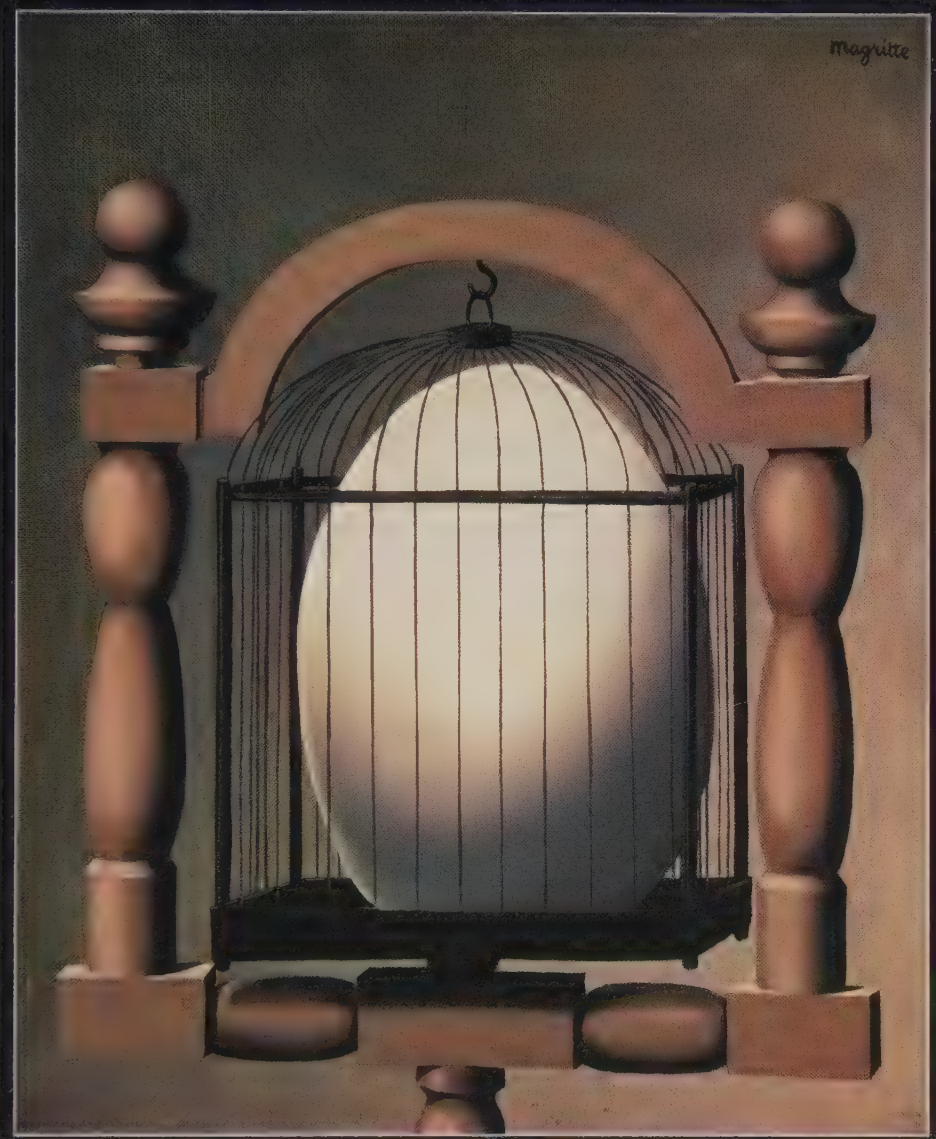
The house and its interior were frequent reference points in Magritte's work from 1930 onwards, and his paintings gradually turned the house into a representation, a kind of model, of his inner universe. Today, the entire house is the Magritte Museum, and visitors encounter it as a kind of stage set which strangely resembles many of Magritte's paintings.

A key revelation

Records of the volumes within Magritte's library show how embroiled he was with philosophy. There was an extensive collection of writings by, and on philosophers, ranging from Descartes, Plato, Camus, Lyotard, Fichte, Hegel, Sartre and Spinoza, to writings on aesthetics, English and American philosophy and phenomenology. At the same time, Magritte was in contact with living philosophers including Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille.

In 1933, his philosophical musings led to a new direction in Magritte's painting: 'One night . . . I awoke in a room in which there was placed a cage, with a bird which had fallen asleep. A magnificent error allowed me to see in the cage an egg instead of a bird.' This mistake revealed an affinity, otherwise invisible, between cage and egg, leading to a new phase of experimenting with encounters between disparate, yet related, objects. As in the biographical accounts of other Surrealists, Magritte tended to locate his key revelatory moments in dreams or hallucinations. However, while in most such Surrealist narratives sleep and dreaming are the sources of inspiration, Magritte's revelatory moment occurs, in fact, in the act of waking up, in the dissipation of the dream state. Much later, in 1962, he emphasized this in an interview: 'I have never dreamt of paintings to be executed. The world does not present itself like a dream in my sleep. I can only "See" a picture when I'm completely awake and additionally have at my disposal a complete "presence of mind". I haven't got this presence of mind in my sleep.' The painting *Elective Affinities* expresses Magritte's new theoretical position. Its title is a translation of that of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's 1809 novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. Goethe's title refers to a chemical process in which certain substances show a preference for others. Goethe tried to use this chemical process as a model or metaphor to analyze human relations and marriage.

It was at this time that Breton and Eluard also started sending books to Magritte with inscriptions such as 'To René Magritte, his friend in spite of everything, André Breton'. Breton also approached Magritte, through Paul Nougé, to express his interest in Magritte's new work and to ask him to contribute to the *SASDLR*, signalling the end of their estrangement.



Elective Affinities

René Magritte, 1933

Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
16⅛ × 13 in
Private Collection

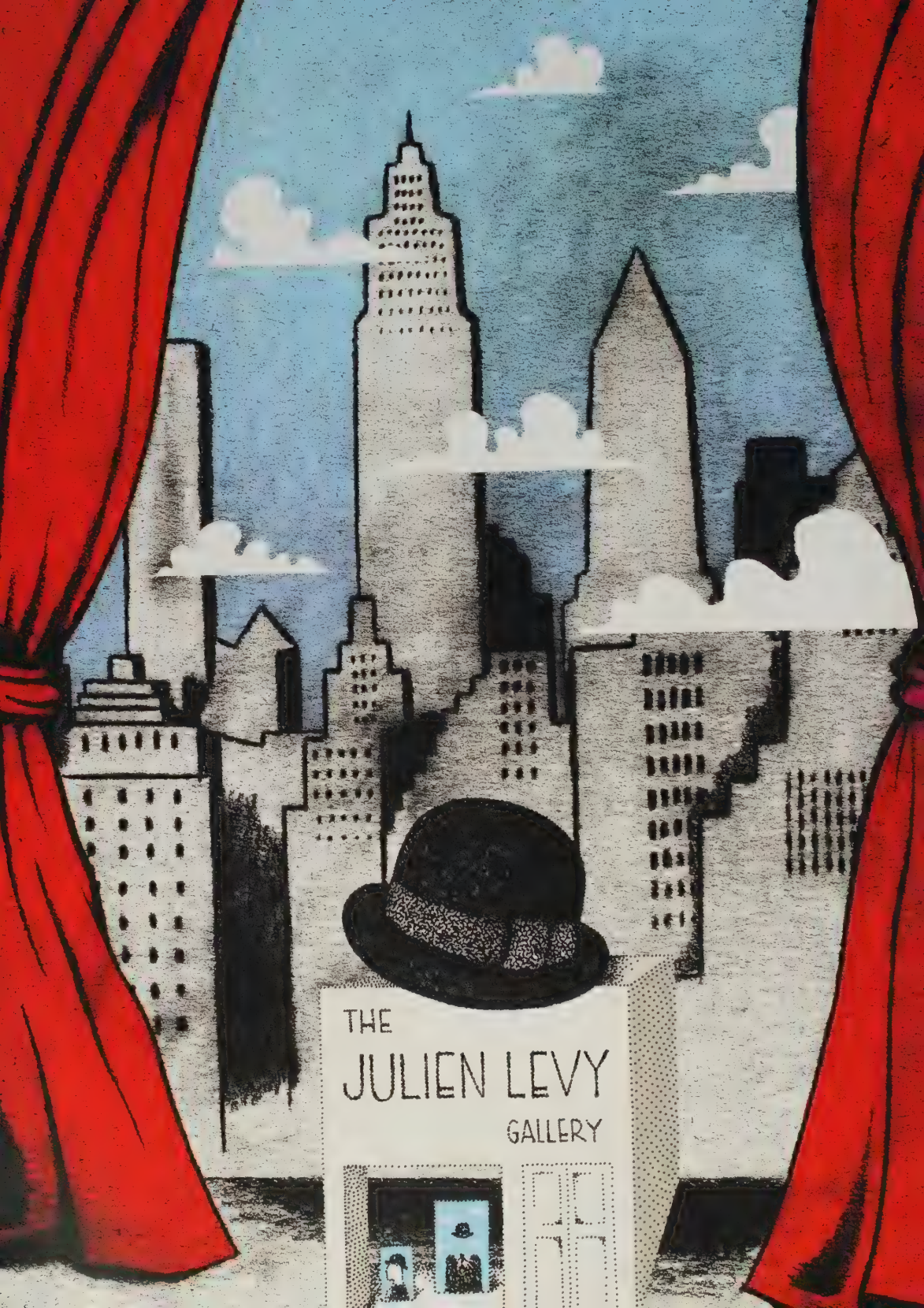
The Human Condition
René Magritte, 1933
Oil on canvas, 100 × 81 cm (39⅜ × 31⅞ in)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
Gift of the Collectors Committee (1987.55.1)

The representation in us

Magritte regarded *The Human Condition* as the second painting emerging from his new, somewhat cryptic method of exploring the 'problem' of an object, and finding a 'solution' for it:

> The problem of the window gave rise to *The Human Condition*. In front of a window seen from the inside of a room, I placed a picture representing exactly the section of the landscape hidden by the picture. The tree represented in the picture therefore concealed the tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, it was both inside the room in the picture, and, at the same time, conceptually outside in the real landscape.

The setting of this painting is clearly a window in the dining or living room of the Esseghem apartment, but the view on to the small suburban gardens behind the house is replaced by sweeping countryside. Magritte's painting is a philosophical exploration, drawing on Plato's allegory of the cave. To articulate the role of the philosopher in seeing truth, Plato uses the allegory of people who have lived chained to a wall of a cave all their lives. They mistake as reality the shadows projected on to the wall from things passing in front of a fire behind them. Magritte's *The Human Condition* posits a similar allegory, questioning the relationship between representation and reality, preceding by decades later Poststructuralist and Postmodernist arguments. It argues that it is always representation that fills in the blanks of reality for us: we cannot look at the world outside representation. Or, as Magritte himself put it: 'This is how we see the world. We see it outside of ourselves, and yet only have a representation of it in us.' This painting is more explicit than any of his other work in suggesting that art is a mediator of reality, a representation always standing between the spectator and the real world.


THE
JULIEN LEVY
GALLERY

A one-man show in America

From 1935, Magritte was finally able to focus entirely again on his painting, largely at first through the support of the Belgian novelist and playwright Claude Spaak, who bought his work and rallied his family to do so as well. By the end of the year, Mesens was also representing Magritte as his agent abroad. Mesens was by this point increasingly based in London, becoming a key player in establishing Surrealism in Britain, and in building networks between Belgian, French and British artists.

In January 1936, Magritte was at last given a one-man show at the hottest spot for Surrealist art in New York, the Julien Levy Gallery at 602 Madison Avenue (at 57th St.). Instead of providing his most recent work, however, 15 of the 22 works exhibited in New York were replicas or variations of earlier work. These replicas were mostly small, measuring 33 by 41 centimetres (13 to 16 inches) or less, perhaps to save on shipping them across the Atlantic and to encourage faster sales once they arrived. Magritte thus found himself forced to repeat earlier work in order to earn money from a conservative market, something that would become a regular practice for the rest of his career.

Magritte did not attend this New York show. He hated travelling and remarked, 'my holidays take place at home: I am planning travels only reluctantly'. A trip to New York would have been particularly daunting. Levy was disappointed both that the works were largely replicas and by their small size, and the show didn't sell well – possibly the prices were also set too high. The critical response was lukewarm. Edward Alden Jewell, reviewing it for *The New York Times*, said: 'Whereas Dalí concerns himself with the rigmarole of dreams, René Magritte delights just in the use of metaphor, depending for his effect just upon the shock produced by a spectacle of objects or ideas arbitrarily – which is to say grotesquely and sometimes quite madly – related.'

There were, nevertheless, those who were hooked. Levy himself bought five paintings, and featured them in his second Magritte show, in 1938. Alfred H. Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, was also interested. In December 1936, Magritte was included in MoMA's landmark 'Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism', an exhibition that defined the public perception of who belonged in the Surrealist and Dadaist canon. Barr was a Harvard classmate of Levy, as was James Thrall Soby, another significant collector, critic and curator of Magritte's work.

Magritte in Britain

The year 1936 began well for Magritte and kept getting better. In June, London's prestigious New Burlington Galleries hosted the 'International Surrealist Exhibition' and, notably, included Magritte's work. The principal organizers were Mesens and Roland Penrose, an aristocratic artist, poet, collector, gallerist and champion of Surrealism in Britain. They ran the exhibition in association with the group from Paris, including Breton, Eluard, Man Ray and Dalí. The show caused major turmoil and excitement – a Surrealist phantom, her head completely covered by red roses, wandered around Trafalgar Square, while Dalí nearly suffocated on stage when giving a speech in a deep-sea diving suit. Magritte was well received and the works sold, as was amply reported at the time, including in this instance by *The Manchester Guardian*: 'But it is René Magritte who is proving the most popular. Five Magrittes have been sold already, but at a relatively low price, since Magritte before this was hardly known in this country.'

Magritte's success in Britain continued – the next year he was commissioned by the wealthy eccentric, poet and collector Edward James to paint three large pictures, spending over a month with James in his home at 35 Wimpole Street in London. Magritte painted the pieces for the Adams ballroom in James's house, and they were completed to mark a ball given for James's niece in April 1937. A number of subsequent commissioned works featuring James became some of the most significant ones in his œuvre. One of these, called *Not to be Reproduced*, from 1937, is based on a photographic portrait of James standing with his back to the viewer looking at one of his Magritte commissions, a picture reworked in the painting as a mirror gone awry – rather than reflecting James's face in the mirror, the view of the back of his head is disconcertingly repeated in the mirror image.

The success of Surrealism in Britain was such that in 1938 Mesens and Penrose opened the London Gallery at 28 Cork Street. Mesens's holdings, including around 250 Magrittes, formed the main stock for the gallery – and the inaugural exhibition, in April 1938, was another one-man show for Magritte. *The Scotsman* newspaper reported: 'The René Magritte exhibition at the London Gallery . . . is anything but innocent. Magritte is a Surrealist. What for the hundredth time, is Surrealism? "It is," says André Breton, "the cuckoo's egg laid in the nest (whose brood is lost) with the complicity of René Magritte".'

God, the Eighth Day
René Magritte, 1937
Gelatin silver print, 8.5 × 5.7 cm (3⅜ × 2¼ in)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Ford Motor Company Collection,
Gift of Ford Motor Company
and John C. Waddell, 1987 (1987.1100.312)

Photography

Photography is central to an understanding of Magritte's œuvre. He relied heavily on photographs for his paintings, reversing the conventional primacy of the unique and original (the painting) over the reproduced (the photograph). In Magritte's case, the unique was often already based on a reproduction. According to his friend, admirer and collector Claude Spaak, Magritte would begin a portrait by first asking for photographs of the subject and, only later, arranging some sittings. Still more complex is the relationship between reproduction and time in Magritte's own photographs, such as *God, the Eighth Day* (1937): this photograph is based on a restaging, or enactment, of a painting, *The Healer II* (1937), but it is also the model for *The Liberator* painted ten years later (see page 4).

Photography was a passion he shared with Paul Nougé (who also produced a significant body of photographic work). Magritte's photographs include a great deal of holiday snapshots, among them moments of horseplay with the Brussels Surrealists, as well as records of artworks and re-enactments of paintings. But photography was also integral in the transformation of Magritte into the public figure 'Magritte'. Many photographers, including Lee Miller, Duane Michals and Roger Dyckmans, shaped the image of Magritte as the bowler-hatted artist, encouraging the conflation of Magritte himself with his depictions of this figure.

Another war

Magritte came to see one of his paintings, *The Black Flag*, of 1937, as a premonition of World War II. This war saw Belgium again occupied by the Germans, in May 1940, an occupation that lasted until early 1945. The painting shows five strange flying machines, hovering menacingly; the inspiration for this dystopian vision again came from *Larousse*, in particular a chart showing aircrafts from World War I.

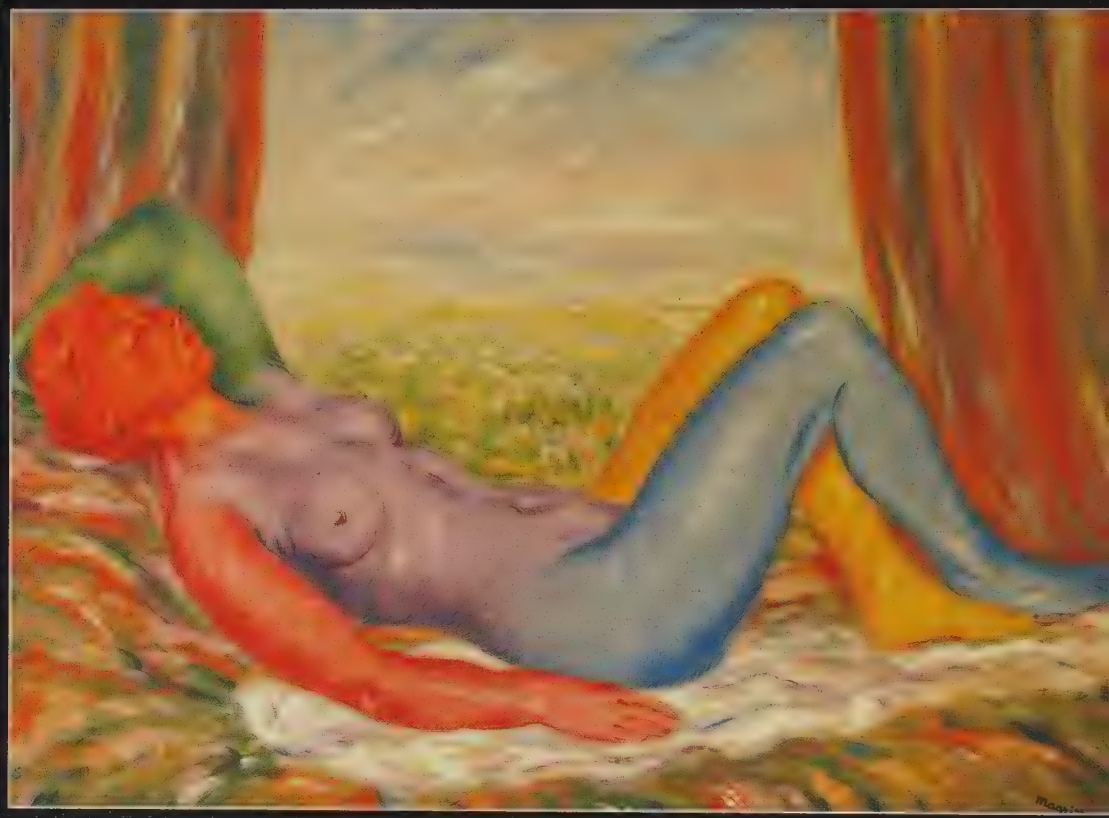
Leaving behind Georgette and his family and travelling just ahead of the invading German troops, Magritte fled Brussels on 15 May for Paris. Georgette did not want to leave Brussels due to her attachment to her sister, Léontine, and to Paul Colinet, another Surrealist with whom she had been having an affair since 1937 (in response, perhaps, to Magritte's own short-lived affair with the artist Sheila Legge during one of his stays in London).

He ran into fellow Surrealists Louis Scutenaire, Irène Hamoir and Raoul and Agui Ubac at the station, which was crammed with people as the trains had stopped running. They stayed together, travelling by tram, lorry and foot to Lille through refugee-choked roads that were subject to attack by German aircraft. From Lille, they were able to get a train to Paris.

The group split in Paris and, desperate for money, Magritte visited Claude Spaak to pick up one of his paintings to try to sell it to wealthy collector Peggy Guggenheim before she returned to America. According to Guggenheim, Magritte surprised her on a visit to the framer Lefèbvre-Foinet. She paid cash for the picture on the spot. Magritte was able, therefore, to travel to Carcassonne, near the southern French border with Spain, in late May, where he stayed in a rented house with Scutenaire, Hamoir and the Ubacs.

By the middle of June Magritte resolved to return to Brussels, and particularly to Georgette. According to Hamoir, in the absence of any trains, he hired a bike and bought a dozen eggs for provisions, setting off, 'after some outpourings of emotion amounting almost to a dramatic farewell, at least on his side. His friends, on the other hand were sure they would see him again before the end of the day. Four hours later, he returned, exhausted . . . and crestfallen.' After weeks of trying to secure a travel permit across newly occupied France to Belgium, Magritte eventually managed to return to Brussels, and to Georgette, in August 1940. The dangers of this return are clear from Magritte's postscript in a letter to Scutenaire: 'If I happen to die on the way, tell Georgette when you see her again that my last thought will have been for her.'

The Black Flag
René Magritte, 1937
Oil on canvas
54 × 73 cm (21¼ × 28¾ in)
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art
Edinburgh



The Harvest
René Magritte, 1943
Oil on canvas
60 × 80 cm (23⅝ × 31½ in)
Private Collection

Renoir

'Since the beginning of this war, I have had a strong desire to achieve a new poetic effectiveness which would bring us both charm and pleasure. I leave to others the business of causing anxiety and terror and mixing everything up as before.' Magritte wrote this in a letter to the Belgian artist Pol Bury in February 1945, soon after the liberation of Belgium. Indeed, from 1943, Magritte's paintings had already started on this new path, adopting some of the stylistic and thematic traits of Impressionism and particularly of Pierre-Auguste Renoir. A young friend, the artist Marcel Mariën (and Belgian Surrealism's first historian), explained this when describing Magritte's *The Harvest* of 1943:

> One day, then, while leafing through a book on Impressionism, Magritte was seduced by the idea of reproducing one of Renoir's bathers with each part of her body painted a different colour. The left arm was painted green, the right arm and the head red, while from the violet torso there extended a blue leg and a yellow one. . . . Magritte, not content with transforming his bather, also appropriated Renoir's representational style.

He not only changed his colour palette in these Renoiresque paintings, but his brushstrokes were also more tactile, swirling, less polished than the style for which he is best known.

This new representational style was certainly not an anomaly given the length of time Magritte deployed it (until the spring of 1947) and the number of images he produced in it (around 70). While he continued, to some extent, to paint in his 'signature' smooth style, the colour palette in the Renoir-style paintings also moved closer to that of his Impressionist works. The importance of this style for Magritte is demonstrated by his featuring Impressionist works in eight (out of 20) illustrations in his first monograph, published in 1943 in the midst of the war by his friend Mariën. According to Mariën, Magritte went to great lengths to pay for colour reproductions for this monograph, including the making and selling of forged images. Far from being the product (as he disingenuously claimed) of his having adopted a more charming and pleasurable style in the face of misery, Magritte's work during the German occupation was a bold statement: it was a clear political protest, aligning him with occupied France and the modern art and culture of France that the Nazi regime was trying to destroy.

Sunlit Surrealism

Magritte's move towards Impressionism culminated in his postwar concept of *Le Surréalisme en plein soleil* (Sunlit Surrealism). In a letter to Breton of 25 June 1946, Magritte proclaims a new age – the *période solaire* (solar period):

> The painting of my 'solar period' is obviously in contradiction to many things we were convinced of before 1940. . . . The confusion and panic that Surrealism wanted to create in order to bring everything into question were achieved much better by the Nazi idiots than by us, and there was no question of avoiding the consequences. . . . In opposition to the general pessimism, I set the search for joy, for pleasure. I feel it lies with us, who have some notion of how feelings are invented, to make joy and pleasure, which are so ordinary and beyond our reach, accessible to us all.

Breton's response was negative in the extreme. In his text '*Devant le rideau*' ('In front of the curtain'), for a 1947 exhibition catalogue, he opposed the attitude that artists should, 'admit into their work only "charm, pleasure, sunshine, objects of desire" to the exclusion of anything connected with "sadness, boredom, threatening objects"!' He compared the position to a backward child insisting on fixing the needle of a barometer to 'fair' in order to ensure a day of sunshine. Magritte considered the statement as his 'excommunication' from Surrealism.

Both Breton and Mesens disliked Magritte's Impressionist style, and they were far from alone. The Impressionist work didn't sell. American dealer Alexander Iolas, who after the war became Magritte's New York dealer, made this clear in a letter of 21 November 1948:

> The people who like your pre-1940 painting do so unanimously because they find it more poetic and superior to those 5 [Impressionist] pictures I sent back to you and they are very keen to acquire the old ones . . . Nor do I ask you to copy the old pictures, but only not to break with the mysterious, poetic quality of your former pictures, which by their compact technique were much more Magritte than those in which the Renoiresque technique and colouring strike everyone as outmoded.

Like a marionette, Magritte felt himself manipulated by both the art market and the Surrealists. Even Georgette preferred the 'signature' style.

The Famine
René Magritte, 1948
Oil on canvas.
46 × 55 cm (18⅛ × 21⅝ in)
Private Collection

Le tout Paris

One thorn that particularly stuck in Magritte's side in the postwar period was that, while he was a well-established artist in Belgium, the United States and Britain, he had never been fully embraced by the Parisian art scene, nor had he held a one-man show there. In May 1948 he was, finally, given a brief one-man show in a relatively minor gallery, Galerie du Faubourg. His pursuit of even this small 'crumb' of an exhibition reveals how much store he set by being acknowledged by Paris and the level of disappointment and humiliation he must have felt, over the years, because of the repeated rebuffs of Breton and the French avant-garde.

It is, therefore, all the more interesting that, instead of preparing canvases for the Paris show in his 'signature style', which he knew they would like, Magritte instead produced specifically for this exhibition, over a period of five weeks, a range of paintings in a new style which he called '*vache*' ('cow'). The colour palette was strident and wild, much like the work of the Fauves at the beginning of the century, who typically used wild brushwork and strong, vivid and vibrant colours. Magritte's *The Famine* (1948) epitomizes his use of this style. It also betrays the influence of turn-of-the-century Belgian artist James Ensor, whose work had been influential in the development of Expressionism and Surrealism.

The exhibition was not well received and not a single piece was sold. Magritte wrote, in a letter to Louis Scutenaire and Irène Hamoir:

> At the exhibition, there are visitors – young girls have a tendency to laugh, but they control themselves because laughter is out of place in art galleries. Visitors who utter the usual bullshit. 'It's less profound than previously', it's 'Belgian wit', 'you can tell it's not Parisian' . . ..

One suspects that, in some way, this brought Magritte satisfaction – at the moment of the fulfilment of his desire to have a one-man exhibition in Paris, destroying that moment with his own brush. The exhibition had come too late, the gallery was too small and, being in the dealer Iolas's hands (which promised the much larger and richer American art market), he was no longer dependent on Paris. This exhibition could be understood as Magritte playing a big joke on the Parisian set. Certainly, after the exhibition Magritte returned to his 'signature' style. He wrote to Scutenaire in June 1948: 'Above *all* to please Georgette, in future I shall exhibit the old kind of painting,' adding 'I'm sure I'll find a way now and again of slipping in some good hefty joke.'

Poetry

One preoccupation that Magritte seems to have reignited in his return to his 'signature style' was his dialogue with literature. In a 1937 lecture in London on his 'word and image' theories, he also presented an example of how a picture could replace a word, illustrating this by replacing a word in a text by André Breton with a picture. Magritte chose a line from Breton's poem *'L'Aigrette'* ('The Egret') of 1923 – 'If only the sun would shine tonight' – to demonstrate his idea, by replacing the word 'sun' with a drawn sun.

Magritte further evolved this idea of a dialogue with literature, in this case a poem by Paul Nougé, in *The Empire of Light* more than ten years later, in 1949. He went on to paint 17 versions of this suburban scene, in which the daylit sky is juxtaposed with a night-time street scene, a lantern incongruously illuminating the lower part of the painting. In a 1956 television interview, he described the scene as, 'a nocturnal landscape and a skyscape such as can be seen in broad daylight. The landscape suggests night and the skyscape day. This evocation of night and day seems to me to have the power to surprise and delight us. I call this power: poetry.'

Like his 'word and image' paintings, and many other elements of his œuvre, *The Empire of Light* is closely engaged with the visual (painting) and the verbal (poetry). For Magritte, one of the functions of painting was definitely to make poetry 'visible': in addition to *The Empire of Light*, he made other paintings that visualized concepts and images from sources including the *One Thousand and One Nights*, works by Edgar Allan Poe, and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Not infrequently, he would borrow titles from literature as a way of illuminating (often obliquely) the meaning of his own paintings, including Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (see page 50), Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons*, Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* and Breton's *Communicating Vessels*.

The Empire of Light, II
René Magritte, 1950
Oil on canvas, 78.8 × 99.1 cm (31 × 39 in)
The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Gift of D. and J. de Menil (16.1951)

Magritte to go

Magritte's growing prosperity and fame (evident in commissions such as one from the Belgian Government, in 1958, to paint a mural for the new Palais des Congrès in Brussels) increasingly estranged him from his Surrealist friends in Brussels. Particularly noted was his purchase of a grand piano, on which Nougé, probably jealously, commented, 'It's a fine thing to have a grand piano, but you have to know how to make use of it.' Mesens noticed that the Saturday evening gatherings at the Magrittes became increasingly a space for Magritte to be flattered by young admirers in awe of the artist, who sat listening to his every word while, according to Mesens, Magritte behaved as if he were a 'master'. In 1962 his younger friend Marcel Mariën circulated a spoof advertisement which mocked Magritte's purchase of a fur coat, jewels and an expensive car for Georgette. With the title 'Great Bargain Sale', the advert parodied Magritte in saying: '. . . my painting is coming to resemble a form of merchandise . . .. People now buy my paintings as they buy land, a fur coat or jewels.'

His old friends' primary concern, however, was with Magritte's 'working to order' to supply copies of his most famous pictures, when, as they recalled, he had always said that if he became rich he would only paint pictures he was really keen to do. He had, they claimed, always derided the act of painting as merely a 'manual occupation'. Between 1956 and 1957, for instance, he painted 53 paintings for the Chicago lawyer Barnet Hodes, all of which were replicas, or virtual replicas, of older works, each measuring around 23 by 17 centimetres (9 by 6½ inches). It was a kind of further evolution of what he had done for the first Levy gallery exhibition in 1936. Hodes wanted the paintings in order to create a 'Magritte wall' that would form, as he noted in a letter to Magritte, a 'representative collection of your wonderful pictures in the small form that I enjoy so much'.

But, despite becoming estranged from Mesens, Mariën and Nougé, the Magrittes remained close to many of their old friends, including Lecomte, Hamoir, Scutenaire and Goemans, and began friendships with a new generation of poets such as André Bosmans and Jacques Wergifosse.

The Two Mysteries
René Magritte, 1966
Oil on canvas,
65 × 80 cm (25⅝ × 31½ in)
Private Collection

Pipe dreams

Magritte's reproductions and multiple versions of the same artwork have sometimes been seen as a mindless rehashing, or, due to the blatant nature of his copying, as a critique and mockery of the art market. But, just as often, the slight but significant changes between different versions is comparable to a philosopher who constantly turns a problem or concept over in his mind.

In 1966 Magritte read French philosopher Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (literally *Words and Things*, but published in English as *The Order of Things*), a title Magritte had used for an exhibition of his works at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, in 1954. Foucault shared Magritte's fascination with the relationship between words and things and, in 1968 (a year after Magritte's death), he published an early version of his essay '*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*' ('This is not a pipe'). The title is taken from Magritte's famous 1929 painting of a pipe suspended in the air, underneath which is written 'This is not a pipe'. In an interview of 6 July 1966, Magritte claimed: 'I've been reproached for it extensively! And yet . . . can you fill it, my pipe? No, isn't it so; it is only a representation. If I had written underneath my image "This is a pipe", I would have been lying!' With the pipe, Magritte took his examination of representation and reality to a new level: the model for his pipe was, again, taken from a *Larousse* entry, on 'pipes' – there was never an original pipe, only representations of a generic concept of a pipe.

Foucault explored this further when describing a 1966 Magritte painting on the pipe enigma, *The Two Mysteries*:

> There are two pipes. Or rather must we not say, two drawings of the same pipe? Or yet a pipe and the drawing of that pipe, or yet again two drawings each representing a different pipe? Or two drawings, one representing a pipe and the other not, or two more drawings yet, of which neither the one nor the other are or represent pipes? Or yet again, a drawing representing not a pipe at all but another drawing, itself representing a pipe so well that I must ask myself: To what does the sentence written in the painting relate?

Pipes, illustration from *Twentieth-century Larousse*, 1928–33.

'Quoth the Raven'

In 1965, Magritte visited America for the first and only time, to attend the opening of a major retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This was followed by a visit to the fervent Magritte collectors Jean and Dominique de Menil in Houston. Magritte and Georgette took with them their Pomeranian dog, called (like all their previous ones) Loulou, who was allowed to fly with them in the cabin in exchange for Magritte agreeing that the airline could use his works in their publicity. In Houston, Magritte attended a rodeo and swapped his trademark bowler for a cowboy hat. But the great highlight for him was a visit to the Edgar Allan Poe house in The Bronx, in New York City. In a letter to Scutenaire on 17 December, he said: 'Poe's house is the finest in the U.S.A. We were welcomed by a raven on top of a narrow cupboard, his study and his admirably modest furniture (and an old, coal-fired kitchen stove, like those in Picardy) are still in place.'

Magritte admired Poe, whose writings were a frequent reference-point in his works, including *The Domain of Arnheim*, of which Magritte made various versions between 1938 and 1962. The title is taken from an 1847 short story. Poe's story describes the creation, by an extremely wealthy dilettante, of an ideal estate – the domain of Arnheim – such as had only ever existed in painted landscapes, and never with such manicured and organized perfection in nature. In his several visualizations of the subject, Magritte always placed a nest of eggs, bare and fragile, on the stone balustrade of a terrace, set against a mountainscape, the peak of which has been fashioned to evoke the head of an eagle, with the further suggestion of outspread wings.

The Domain of Arnheim
René Magritte, 1962
Oil on canvas,
146 × 114 cm (57½ × 44⅞ in)
Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels

Madame Récamier de David
René Magritte, 1967
Bronze, 197 × 196 × 50 cm
(77⅝ × 77⅛ × 19⅝ in)
Musée national d'art moderne,
Centre Pompidou, Paris

Revisiting old themes

In the first quarter of 1967, Magritte conceived an unusual project that would comprise eight bronze sculptures based on some of his paintings, including his several reworkings of Jacques-Louis David's *Madame Récamier* of 1800. In Magritte's painted version of 1951, a coffin replaced the portrait of the Parisian socialite Juliette Récamier, who had, at the time of David's work, epitomized the ways in which the new post-revolutionary elite of France established its social dominance. He thus redefined *Madame Récamier* in the Netherlandish *vanitas* tradition of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with its obsession with depicting in art the symbols of death. The versions he made of this painting and of the final sculpture are another of his exercises in reproduction. Predictably, all the versions are based on a postcard reproduction of David's original. Before he painted *Madame Récamier*, Magritte had already experimented with the *vanitas* conceit in two paintings, from 1949 and 1950: these were versions of Edouard Manet's *The Balcony*, in which coffins replaced Manet's four figures on a balcony. Typical of Magritte's preoccupation with repetition, the *Madame Récamier* paintings also harked back to Dada, amounting, as they did, to an iconographical burying of artistic traditions, including the use of the figure as subject. As Magritte himself stated, 'I hate tradition'.

The eight bronze sculptures were cast later in 1967. In 1969 Magritte's American dealer Alexander Iolas wrote of this sculpture of *Madame Récamier de David*: '[Magritte] had people search for a day-bed, a lamp and a footstool like those in the painting, and he ordered a coffin from a joiner, all the details of which he designed; then he had them cast precisely.'

These final sculptures became not only pastiches on the death of past traditions, but also anticipations of his own death, and of his own art's becoming part of those dead traditions: Magritte was diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas in June 1967 and died at his home on 15 August. If self-referentiality and circularity are key elements in Magritte's work, here they refer to the future in which the artist himself is no longer alive.

The eternal barbarian

In June 1965, the New York art critic Christopher Finch visited Magritte in the house at 97 rue des Mimosas, into which he and Georgette had moved in 1954:

> M. Magritte welcomes his visitors with studied politeness, speaking with a marked Belgian accent. He leads the way through an entrance hall and into a living room filled with reproduction furniture. A grand piano occupies a large portion of the floor-space and an elaborate chandelier hangs above vases loaded with huge bouquets of flowers. On a marble table-top, in front of a gilt-framed mirror, a carriage clock is flanked by china dogs. A black Pomeranian is in constant attendance. For many years the Magrittes have kept a Pomeranian. When one dies they find an identical one to replace it. Its name is always Loulou [the specific name of this dog's race as cited in *Larousse*], so the change from one dog to another is scarcely more than an extension of the animal's metabolism.

Magritte organized his domestic life in terms of repetitions and reproductions, seemingly without an original. And he himself cannot be regarded as a coherent, graspable whole. As an artist, he was convinced by the primacy of reproduction over reality, but he was also, to an extent, 'entrapped' by reproduction: he mourned the inability of artists to be original and creative, stuck as they were in a battle against tradition that was already lost.

Magritte's work has lent itself to philosophical, art historical, biographical and even (despite his protestations) psychoanalytic interpretations. The works ultimately, however, escape any definitive analysis. Magritte's paintings and sculptures seem to reproduce the movements of the elusive master criminal himself, Fantômas: at the moment of apparent capture (in the form of interpretation), they escape any definite meaning that attempts to attach itself to them. Magritte described them, rightly, as poetic images producing endlessly multiplying meanings:

> I understand painting as art, putting colours next to each other in such a manner that they disappear and a poetic image appears instead. This image is the complete description of a thought that, in an order which is not indifferent, unites familiar figures of the visible. This effective order has been imagined, but is not unreal. The reality of the poetic image is the reality of the universe.

René Magritte with his painting
The Barbarian, 1938

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